

# **TESTIMONY OF SABRINA STEGER**

***March 21, 2000***

## ***SENATE COMMERCE COMMITTEE***

I am the person you do not want to be. I live a parent's worst nightmare. The nightmare does not go away and the saying that time heals all wounds is greatly overrated.

On December 1, 1997 a fourteen-year-old boy took his thoughts and feelings, the sum total of the influences in his life, and five guns into Heath High School. After watching students pray, he opened fire on them. Kayce, Jessica, and Nicole died that day. So did this country's belief that schools are a safe haven for its students.

When I found out that my daughter, Kayce, might have been involved, I rushed back to the hospital I've worked at for 20 years. I had just finished a midnight shift. As I approached the emergency room, there were arms holding me back.

Every time I tried to get a little closer to Kayce, arms stopped me. Those arms were connected to familiar-sounding voices, but the arms were trying to hold me back from the only thing that mattered - getting to my little girl. I still have nightmares about those arms, those obstacles keeping me away from Kayce. I am here today to ask you to not be an arm, an obstacle, that makes it harder for parents to keep their children safe.

We believe the Heath High School shooter was influenced by the movies he watched, the video games he played, and the Internet sites he accessed. With his easy access to guns, his violent urges were allowed to take on a life outside his own troubled mind.

Video games are a common form of entertainment for many young people and more and more often the games are violent. Even before Kayce was killed, I did not allow my kids to play violent games, but I did not know how big the monster was. It isn't Pong or Pac-Man these kids are playing. Despite what some parents think, these are not the video games we played.

Today's games are so sophisticated that some of them even have a recoil after a shot is fired. They are so real that the military uses them to train soldiers. But, the soldiers are adult men and women, not impressionable children. And, the simulations are carefully controlled and monitored, not played whether or not

there is adult supervision.

Yet, the video games are as effective as the simulators. Just how deadly are they? The Heath High School shooter did not miss one shot. From the criminal investigation, we know he practiced only one time with the gun prior to committing murder. A recent case in the news involved police officers firing 41 rounds and striking one man with 19 shots. Less than half of the shots fired by trained policemen hit their target, but 100% of those fired by a teenager hit students in the kill zone, one shot per victim. He didn't shoot until they fell. He learned his game all too well.

Statistically, the average twelve-year-old has seen 8000 murders. Today I am here to tell you about one murder that affected one family, my family. It is being lived out in different stages by the families of the 13 people killed by gun violence every day, 365 days of the year.

My son Dustin was nine when his sister was gunned down. He was at the hospital when she arrived. He saw Kayce taken out of the ambulance with paramedics doing CPR on her. He saw her lying lifeless on a stretcher a little later. He looked at his parents, the ones who could not protect Kayce, and wondered if they could take care of him. He and his sister Becky saw their home change from a place of laughter to a place of tears. In so many ways, they saw their own childhoods end that day. No more innocence, no more carefree days--their lives and futures were forever changed the second that the killer decided to pull the trigger.

There are plenty of kids, who like most adults, who do not want gratuitous violence in video games. My son has a Playstation and he enjoys racing and sports games. For a long time, he wanted a skateboarding game. He finally got it, but he was quickly disappointed. The tricks are "sweet" (for anyone without kids, that means real good), but every time the skateboarder falls blood squirts. Dustin does not want to see the blood, but there aren't any controls to stop it. My son who does not chose blood and guts does not have the choice to play the game the way he wants to. The game is very seldom played.

Violent video games and movies desensitize users to the violence by making it sterile, acceptable and even desirable. Defilement and carnage all too prevalent on the silver screen is easily transferred to any home by video games seen through hand held screens, TV screens and computer monitors.

Blood on the screen has no odor and it cannot be touched. Screams are controlled by the volume button, and slaughter by the on/off button. But, the button is

too often "on," the volume on high, and death repeated each time the restart button is touched.

Some question if video games can have that much influence on young people. The entire advertising industry is built on the knowledge that 30 to 60 second advertisements influence what soft drink or car we buy, and what candidate we vote for. How can we then deny that hours on end of repetitive video game violence does not have a gargantuan impact on impressionable children and adolescents?

For months after Kayce died, I was in denial. My head knew she was dead, but my heart did not believe it. Part of me believed that she was going to walk through the back door again. I was going to hug her for a week and ground her for a month.

As a nurse I am in the business of recognizing illness and injury and being proactive about healing. And, I see an America both addicted to violence and in denial about this addiction. It permeates our homes, playgrounds, and schools. We try to tell ourselves that its somebody else's problem, and isolated incidents. My isolated incident was 15 years old with cute little dimples and the dream of becoming a police officer. She had a heart, a soul, a face, and a name, Kayce Michelle Steger.

Numbness helped me get through the first months after Kayce died and frankly, there are still times when I wish for the numbness. It is a buffer; it protects our emotions from the horrors of reality. For me, numbness helps me to function during a bad day. For our country, numbness allows more children to die. When we are numb, we don't deal with the issue. With violent video games, time is life.

Studies show that one of the most common effects of violent video is desensitization, a type of numbing affect. Scientific studies since the 1960s prove that kids are affected by the violence. One recent study even demonstrates a change in brain patterns measured by a scanner. My daughter's killer, who played Doom and Mortal Kombat, planned for months to take over the school. He dreamed of being in control of the lives of his classmates and he intended to return to the school the next day to be admired for his bravery.

The game industry knows how to make games and they know kids. They know that some adolescents have feelings of being vulnerable during a time of many physical and emotional changes. The games promise them power and control that is as intoxicating to some kids as alcohol or drugs. And just like with

alcohol or drugs, kids deny the effects it has on them.

The game industry also knows how to make a better game. But new games that are safer for children to use cost more money to produce and market. The first-person shooter game is cheap and easy and there are thousands of young kids waiting for a new gun to blow away more victims. It is time for a new generation of games- a generation that places value on human life.

As early as the 1960s we recognized the harmful effects of other adverse influences. So great was the public outcry against tobacco and alcohol it forced bans on TV advertising and limited availability of tobacco and alcohol products. It is time to raise our voices again.

The United States is committed to the rights of free enterprise, and I say "bravo." And, I say just as strongly "here, here" to the notion that with rights comes responsibilities. We are suing the makers of the violent video games that so profoundly influenced and warped Kayce's, Jessica's and Nicole's killer. Our lawsuit is not about free speech. It is about product liability. Plain and simple.

Any person or company that makes a product is responsible for the harm that comes from the use of the product. The same standard holds true if the product influences a person to harm himself or others. Car makers learned to make safer cars partly as a result of product liability cases. The same product liability standards that apply to any other manufacturer are the standards we expect of those who produce violent entertainment.

By holding entrepreneurs of violent entertainment to these standards we are taking steps to keep us all safer. Let them make games as they wish. But, when they do the equivalent of falsely yelling "fire" in a crowded movie theater, then they have to accept moral and legal responsibility for their irresponsibility. We do not ask them to conform to any standard of decency. We expect them to be accountable when their product cause harm to others. Sometimes, the best way to make a company understand safety and responsibility is through their pocketbooks.

I looked into a casket and saw my little girl. There are no words that come close to describing how it feels. Before Kayce died, I was an Intensive Care Unit nurse, taking care of dying children. I tried to put myself in the parents' place as I cried with them when their child's heart wasn't beating any more. I thought I was as close as I could be without losing a child of my own. I know now that I wasn't even on the same planet. Nothing looks the same or feels the same after seeing your own child lying in a casket.

A few months after Kayce was killed, someone suggested that we should quit talking about the murders and forget about any lawsuits and just get back to "normal." It is normal for us to have three children at the dinner table, but there are only two. When my husband and I should have been discussing college choices for Kayce, we were discussing tombstone choices. When my daughter Becky asked, mom, how do I be older than my big sister I didn't find any answer from Dr. Spock The shooter took normal away from my family, and all shooters do with every victim of gun violence.

The person who wanted us to get back to normal was saying that we upset him and made him uncomfortable by reminding him of something bad. Video game makers want us to go away too. They don't want us to speak out about the poison they put into children's minds. They don't want us to demand changes that might affect their pocketbooks. But all of our children are worth more than any bottom line. I live with the fact that I was powerless to prevent Kayce's death that morning. I would be letting her down, making her death more senseless if I didn't do whatever I could to try to prevent the death of another child.

They say that losing a child is the ultimate tragedy. Its even worse when the senseless death of a child shows us nothing and allows the senseless death of another little girl and another little boy.

I may not have much power, but the United States Senate does. Let accountability stand on its own merits in the court room, and not be abridged by favoritism in the back rooms. Please help us prevent the death of innocent children, the victims of killers influenced by violent video games.

- **First, ban the sale of these games to minors.**
- **Next, fund a public awareness campaign to educate Americans about the dangers of these games.**
- **And finally, help us hold accountable the makers of these dangerous products.**

Ending violence as we know it is both a public health and a civil rights struggle. It is time to leave the comfort and stupor of denial. It is time to heal, and in doing so, open our arms to balancing rights with responsibilities, and remedying our horrible national addiction to violence.